

**An Overview of Sun Tzu Art of War: Lessons for Nigeria's Military**

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**Abstract**

*Sun Tzu was one of the legendary strategic thinkers that lived during the classical period. His ground breaking treatise on the art of war 2500 years ago is one of the books that has continued to shape the art of warfare and the world of strategic thinking. Although its content used to be considered as a carefully protected state secret in the past, it is now available to everyone. The paper attempts to examine the lessons that could be learned from Sun Tzu Art of War by Nigeria military in the light of the security challenges facing the country. The paper argues that Sun Tzu concept of art of war is a priceless gift the Nigeria military especially its commanders who are in charge of planning and executing strategy and tactics in the battle field. The study relies on secondary materials and internet sources to drive home the ideas of Sun Tzu. One of the most profound findings from the research reveals that one of the potent ways of winning a war is without fighting which entails the use of diplomatic means. The paper concludes that the need to explore the ideas of Sun Tzu on art of war is essential for the success of Nigeria's military in its various theatre of operations.*

**Introduction**

Sun Tzu was a Chinese general, strategist, and writer, born in 544 BC. He remains one of the most renowned and revered ancient general in the world today.<sup>1</sup>We know relatively little about Sun Tzu, with some even questioning whether he was one person or a group of notable men. Despite this, the most common description of his life was that he was born Sun Wu and obtained the title Sun Tzu (Master Sun) after his performances as a general. Tzu demonstrated the effectiveness of his philosophy by leading an army and winning an impressive battle in the Ch'u state. He then put his philosophy to paper and wrote The Art of War for the King of Wu. This is the oldest military work in existence and probably the finest ever written.<sup>2</sup>His book, offers a framework for waging war and valuable observation on the nature of battle.

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1. Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" and Leadership

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273137751> Accessed 16 November 2021

2 . Sun Tzu, "The Art of War" in T.R. Philips (ed) *Roots of Strategy: The 5 Greatest Military Classics of All Time*(Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books 1985), p.9



The Art of War has been very influential in Chinese political and military history and there is evidence that it has influenced the thinking and practice of political and military leaders in modern China, Japan and the West. The Art of War deals with principles and fundamentals which are ageless. So important was this text that over the millennia it is being translated into many languages, updated and adapted to describe everything from politics to business. The book has thirteen chapters, each assigned to a particular aspect of war and strategy. Although he writes in short, succinct sentences, the brevity of his words always contain a depth of meaning. Consequently, The Art of War has had a significant impact on both Eastern and Western military thinking, which continues to this day.

The Nigerian military in recent years is facing a multi-faceted insecurity challenges in different parts of Nigeria which has threatened the corporate existence of the country. Famous among these insecurity challenges include; the activities of terrorists in the North Eastern part of Nigeria that was felt virtually in many parts of the country especially the capital city, Abuja with successful suicide attempts that claimed the lives of many people and destroyed many properties. Bandits and kidnappers in North-west Nigeria constitutes another security challenge, ravaging homes and abducting innocent citizens for ransom. The north-central, south-south, south-east and south-west are not exempted from these security challenges. The activities of separatists groups, militants and criminal gangs have threatened peace in these areas thereby making the country one of the unsafe places to live in the world. The paper will analyze the 13 chapters of Sun Tzu path breaking work and relate it to modern day art of war and how the Nigeria military and it top commanders can benefit from its numerous lessons

### Laying Plans

In this chapter Sun Tzu sees the art of war as of "vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected."<sup>3</sup> Sun Tzu believed it extremely important that war was thoroughly studied. Studying war is important because it could mean the difference between survival or death of a country. He outlines the some fundamental factors associated with war: moral influence, weather, terrain, command, and doctrine. Taken together, these factors combine to help us to develop a pre-conflict plan of action. In other words, these factors are crucial for strategy. These factors are explained below; Moral law: This refers to that which inspires the population to be in complete agreement with their leader, willing to follow them under any circumstances. It relates to whether or not the people below a leader are confident in their ruler. This confidence ultimately determines the people's willingness to support the stresses of war. Plus, this willingness is directly associated with the likelihood of success when waging war.<sup>4</sup> Military leaders should be able to inspire its men

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<sup>3</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*, (England: Allandale Online Publishers, 2000), p.1

<sup>4</sup> Analysis and Summary of The Art of War by Sun Tzu <https://penlighten.com/an-analysis-of-sun-tzus-art-of-war> Accessed 16 November 2021.

to tow its path and obey its commands at all times without murmuring. This entails that the military is one bloc and its leaders command tremendous respect and loyalty from its members.

Heaven: By heaven Sun Tzu was making reference to terrain. Leaders must consider how difficult or easy it will be for his troops to march over the terrain. As a leader, you have to make this estimation to better understand what condition your troops will arrive in before engaging with the enemy. The changeability of the environment, e.g., the seasons, times of day, and the weather. Sun Tzu in his wisdom considered the importance of terrain in prosecuting warfare. It is obvious that, without the mastery of the terrain in warfare the commander and his men are bound to lose the battle. This explains some of the challenges the Nigerian military has been facing over the years in fighting insecurity in different parts of Nigeria. The terrain of the affected poses a serious challenge which gives the enemy an added advantage over the Nigerian military. This can be illustrated in the fight against the militants of the Niger Delta area. The militants understand their local environment better than the Nigerian military which gives them the advantage to easily elude the Nigerian military. In this kind of situation, the Nigerian military needs re-strategise through enlisting the services of the locals who have a better understanding of the environment. This will aid their victory in the fight against insecurity.

The commander: The importance of the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, and strictness. A leader's assessment of command relates to his own qualities. Specifically, how qualified he is to order the troops and be confident that these orders will be followed accurately. A leader must display command by displaying essential virtues, such as wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness. Finally, a leader's doctrine relates to their organization, control, regulation of supply routes, and the provision of items used by the army. Method and discipline: The clear hierarchy and structure of an army, with clear divisions, subdivisions, and ranks.<sup>5</sup>

When creating military strategy, it is important to put into consideration these factors. This requires asking questions such as: Which of your leaders inspire moral law? Who stands to gain the most from how the heavens and earth lie? On which side are the officers and soldiers better trained? Tzu argues that, by asking such questions, it will be easier to predict who the winning side will be. If a leader can optimize these factors, then the leader is more likely to be successful in war than a significantly bigger army without these factors. Therefore, this pre-engagement planning is crucial. Sun Tzu also argued that all warfare is based on deception. "Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away, when far away, we must make him believe we are near."<sup>6</sup> Adopting this principle will put one's army in a vantage position thereby ensuring victory. He also made some

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War...*, p.4

recommendations which are similar with Mao Tse Tung ideology.<sup>7</sup> He posits that the element of surprise should be utilised optimally. The enemy should be attacked where he is unprepared and if he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If his forces are united, separate them. This boils down to the need of breaking strong alliances where they exist.

### Waging War

War is costly. The longer a battle is being waged, the greater the expenditures of supplies, armor, and weapons. If the military lays siege to an area for a protracted length of time, the soldiers will become weak, their weapons will become dulled, and there is every tendency of running out of resources.<sup>8</sup> This is a clear case of what happened in the Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars. These wars were exhausting, it caused America a whole lot of fortunes in both men and resources. The protracted war on Boko Haram prosecuted by the Nigerian military has equally drained the Nigerian military and has had a negative toll on the country's economy. In the 2023 budget a whopping sum of 1.35 trillion naira was devoted to prosecute the war against terrorists and bandits in the country.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Tzu advised that to engage in warfare intelligently, the military should attack quickly and avoid any delays. When an army has been sent into battle, speed and decisiveness must be adopted. Sun Tzu affirms that one should seek victory in the shortest possible time, with the least cost in casualties to one's enemy, remembering that one had to continue to live next door to him when the fighting is over.<sup>10</sup> He however cautioned that, if a battle goes on for longer than desired, a wise general orders their troops to pillage from the enemy. This will sustain one's army for longer than when relying exclusively on one's resources. It also incentivizes your troops to defeat the enemy, as they will reap the rewards of their loot.<sup>11</sup>

Although this chapter is filled with highly specific details, such as the number of horses and troops to take into battle, the most important takeaway message is the importance of acting quickly. Additionally, victory cannot be achieved without solid preparation and organization ahead of time. This includes understanding your troops and resources so that you never have to send for second provisions. In doing so, you refrain from altering your clearly planned out strategy. The most successful leaders understand and keep track of each of their troops' physical strengths and state of mind. There are several factors that generals have to ensure are accounted for before combat. Otherwise, failure is guaranteed due to a lack of decisive speed.

As well as ensuring these factors have been accounted for, leaders also need to remember that human lives and money are at stake when waging war.

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7. See B. Womack, *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917-1935*, (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1982)

<sup>8</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War...*, p.5

<sup>9</sup> Buhari to spend another 1 trillion to fight Boko Haram, Bandits in Twilight of Administration [www.saharareporters.com](http://www.saharareporters.com) Accessed 13 June 2023.

<sup>10</sup> .M. Carver, *Conventional Warfare in the Nuclear Age* in P.Paret (ed) *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 300

<sup>11</sup>.Ibid.

Therefore, military commanders should never be reckless in their actions. Recklessness will have a psychological impact on the military, which will leave the military exhausted and will also deplete supplies. Tzu advised that military commanders should make use what they have during war. As he rightly noted; "Do not destroy supplies you can use, do not burn food that you can eat, and do not kill soldiers who can either give you information or join your ranks."<sup>12</sup> This strategy was adopted in the Calabar sector of the Nigerian Civil War as demonstrated by Alabi Isama where he affirmed that captives of war were recruited into their ranks.<sup>13</sup> The top military hierarchy should put into consideration winning over their enemies into their ranks through every available means at their disposal.

### Attack by Stratagem

Here Sun Tzu noted that in war, it is best to conquer one's opponent's territory entirely and intact. Thus, raising it to the ground is pointless. Likewise, it is better to recapture an army than to kill them. The best strategy in war is to defeat your enemy without ever fighting them. Sun Tzu described this as the acme of skill.<sup>14</sup> For him, diplomacy is the best means of attaining his ideal of victory without bloodshed. When advising that the enemy's plan should be attacked at their inception, Sun Tzu was presumably referring to diplomatic and political bargaining, negotiation, and deception. As the next best step, he recommends disruption of the enemy's alliances. When deprived of external support, the enemy can, he believes, be expected to abandon his plans for war or at least be more rapidly defeated in isolation.<sup>15</sup> "What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."<sup>16</sup> The main aim is to pit off capabilities against vulnerabilities and thereby nullify enemy plans, programs and operations. Sun Tzu contended that the worst policy is to attack cities. Ethical considerations aside there is good reason to agree because assaults on metropolis would destroy assets that both sides need to recuperate and deprive the victors of spoils that could embellish their post-war power base.<sup>17</sup>

Victory in war is not about the degree of destruction you created. Instead, the goal of war is to subdue and subsume the enemy. This kind of victory can only be achieved through careful planning. Sun Tzu gave further tips on the subject matter which include:

- Surround the enemy if your forces significantly outnumber the enemy's forces.
- If you have five times more troops than your enemy, you should attack them. If you have two times more, then you should divide the enemy and fight them that way.

<sup>12</sup>L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War...*

<sup>13</sup>See G.A. Isama *The Tragedy of Victory on-the-Spot Account of the Nigerian-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World...*, p.8

<sup>15</sup> M.I. Handel, *Masters of War Classical Thought*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p.22

<sup>16</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World...*, p.41

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Collins, *Military Strategy, Principle, Practices, and Historical Perspective*, (Unites States of America: Brassey's Inc., 2002), p.65

- If your enemy outnumbered you, then you should hide. Plus, if they significantly outnumber you, then you should escape.
- You need a general who can make his own decisions without people above them interfering.<sup>18</sup>

The Nigerian military can leverage on the above strategy by engaging the political leaders to engage more in diplomacy to avert the outbreak of conflict. It is cheaper to engage in diplomacy than to throw one's military into a full blown conflict. War should be the last resort.

### **Tactical Dispositions**

Here, Sun Tzu emphasized the need of first securing oneself against defeat. Then, wait for one's enemy to provide one with an opportunity to conquer them. This may mean knowing how to overthrow one's enemy for a while but not actually doing so. A clever general is, thus, one who wins their battles with ease and makes no mistakes. They first create plans to ensure victory before engaging in warfare. Such military planning is comprised of five methods: To understand and measure the battle terrain, to estimate the enemy's numbers, to estimate the enemy's strength, to estimate the enemy's chances against you, and to estimate your chances of victory.<sup>19</sup> This can be achieved through adequate intelligence. This is indeed very strategic for the Nigeria's military in the fight against insecurity. Adequate preparation should be put in place before deploying military personnel for operation. In line with the ideas of Sun Tzu the Nigerian military should learn to exploit the weaknesses of its military. It is more profitable for the military to fortify its defence mechanism while carrying out preemptive strikes on the enemy's front. This one great lesson for the Nigeria's military should imbibe in prosecuting its operations.

### **Energy**

Sun Tzu asserts that the control of a large force is the same principle as the control of a few men: It is merely a question of dividing up their numbers. He recommends adopting a pyramid of command where one builds one's team from the base at the bottom, which should include individual soldiers. Then, move up each level by creating larger and larger units. For example, pair, trio, squad, section, platoon, company, battalion, regiment, group, brigade, and army. At each level, one should be incorporating a commander to obey his superiors and control his inferiors. Correct organization can allow your troops to still understand when they should be advancing and retreating, even when they are spread out and unable to communicate.<sup>20</sup>

Sun Tzu claims that handling an extraordinary force can be achieved by realizing that its components like the well-organized and systematic structure of an army are few, but the possible combinations are limitless. To provide an

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<sup>18</sup>. Analysis and Summary of The Art of War by Sun Tzu <https://penlighten.com/analysis-of-sun-tzus-art-of-war> Accessed 16 November 2021.

<sup>19</sup>. L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World...*, p.14

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.15

example of these limitless variations, Sun Tzu describes how one can create limitless arrangements from just five music notes or five primary colors. When the enemy can be enticed or lured into a risky attack, an advantage can be gained. In this way, a skilled general controls his enemy's movements instead of being controlled by the enemy. This brings to the fore the relevance of organization for the Nigerian military and the ability of men of the military to take commands and instructions from superior command.

### **Weak Points and Strong**

In this chapter Sun Tzu argued that: "Whoever is first in the field and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted."<sup>21</sup> Therefore a smart combatant makes the first move and, therefore, never engages in warfare from the back foot. Strike at vulnerable points, and do not attack your enemy where they are well defended. The river Niger crossing during the Nigerian Civil War is a reverse example of this assertion. The Nigerian army under Col Murtala Mohammed attacked the Biafran Army when they were well defended along the banks of the river and ended up losing a lot of his men.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, you should learn to defend your weak spots from a surprise attack.

By remaining obscure to your opponent, you can uncover their weaknesses while remaining invisible. This allows you to concentrate your forces while your enemies are divided. Try to discover your opponent's plans, and with this information, calculate the likelihood of their success. Understand the strengths of your opposing army so you can better spot its weaknesses and strike where it is weak. This is a valid strategy for the Nigerian military in its fight against insecurity. The need to deploy intelligence cannot be overstated the military should ensure that the defence mechanism of its enemy is completely weakened before it attacks. This can be achieved through the deployment of the Nigerian Air force a component of the Nigerian military in carrying out airstrikes on the enemy's line before deploying ground troops for mop up operations.

### **Maneuvering**

Here Sun Tzu suggests a complicated tactic of pretending you are on an aimless course when, in reality, you are actually on a direct and focused path. This approach aims to confuse the enemy while also teaching your lower-ranked army members how to obey complex and changing commands. Although potentially highly effective, this tactic should only be used by highly experienced leaders. This tactics was adopted by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu during Operation Damisa in the first military coup which got Sir Ahmadu Bello,

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<sup>21</sup> L. Giles (trans.) Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World..., p.19

<sup>22</sup> . See H.B. Momoh , The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970: History and Reminiscences (Ibadan: Keinbin Press, 2000).

the Premier of the Northern region killed.<sup>23</sup> A night before the attack on the premises of the Premier, Nzeogwu and his men were carrying out military drills not too far from the Premier's residence. Unknown to the Premier, Nzeogwu and his were planning an attack on his residence.

There's a story about Sun Tzu where he was challenged to train an army out of the king's concubines. For obvious reasons, this was seemingly impossible. He would give an order, then they would laugh and carry on. To create order, he then executed two of the king's favorite concubines. Now, everyone listened and maneuvered precisely as directed. This story shows that getting your army to maneuver can be one of the most challenging tasks for a leader. Hence, some difficult decisions might have to be made to encourage maneuvering.

Sun Tzu also provides specific guidance on maneuvering. Firstly, you should encourage your army to only split up when it is absolutely necessary. It is better to ensure that all troops arrive at the battlefield in good condition and simultaneously. Plus, you want your army to be arriving before the opposing army. Sun Tzu described this timeliness and togetherness as an advantageous position.<sup>24</sup>

#### Variation of Tactics

Circumstances sometimes call for different tactics and different choices. There are cities you should not attack. There are roads you should not take. These tactics all come from the general, and there are five major ways that a general can fail when deciding tactics.

- Being reckless and impatient leads to destruction.
- Cowardice and fear lead to eventual capture.
- A hasty temper means one can be baited and provoked.
- A high standard of honor means one might be susceptible and sensitive to shame.
- Excessive compassion for the troops might make a general second guess his decisions and worry about them instead of focusing on victory alone.<sup>25</sup>

Sun Tzu claims that whenever an army is defeated, or a leader is slain, one of these five faults is to blame. The top hierarchy of the Nigerian military can draw a lot of lesson from this line of thought of Sun Tzu to avoid costly mistakes in carrying out its operations.

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<sup>23</sup> For more details see A. M. Mainasara, *The Five Majors Why they Struck*, (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishers Company, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Analysis and Summary of The Art of War by Sun Tzu <https://penlighten.com/analysis-of-sun-tzus-art-of-war> Accessed 16 November 2021.

<sup>25</sup> L. Giles (trans.) *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World...*, pp.31-32



### **The Army on the March**

When on the march, always stick close to sources of sustenance, and camp in high places that are facing the sun. When on dry, even land, identify an accessible position with rising ground on both the right and the rear. This means that you can see danger approaching while escaping safely behind where you are stationed. Once you have positioned your army, you must search any nearby ponds, hollow basins filled with reeds, or woods as your enemy may have spies positioned here. Look at the birds when they suddenly rise upwards, as it often means soldiers are in ambush beneath them. However, if birds gather on any singular spot, it means it is unoccupied.<sup>26</sup>

If envoys from the enemy are sent across to you in a friendly manner, it means they are seeking a truce. If your enemy's troops line up before you but do not advance, you must be cautious. It could mean that they are planning a surprise flank attack. If your opponent's armies are of a similar size, then no direct attack can be made. Here, all you can do is cultivate your existing strength, observe your enemy, and obtain reinforcements. Sun Tzu also recommends using bad weather or terrain conditions to your advantage. For example, suppose there is a rainy weather and several rivers in front of you. In that case, you should aim to push the opposing army back, so they have to fight within this area.

### **The Use of Spies**

"If a war drags out for many years, you will deplete your treasury, and there will be much unrest in your homeland. To prevent a long war, you must learn to use spies effectively to know when to strike the enemy. You can only trust spies if you pay them sufficiently for their services. However, the costs of paying a few good spies compared to the costs of a drawn-out war are minuscule."<sup>27</sup> Sun Tzu argument for the employment of spies was based on economics. The cost of fielding an enemy was so enormous in ancient China as it is today. To march 100,000 men into enemy's country would cost 1,000 ounces of silver a day. In addition, as many as 700,000 families would be so badly affected by the presence of an army that they would not be able to do their daily work, which would reduce tax revenue. If, through a lack of useful military intelligence, the commanding general was uncertain of the enemy's disposition then a war might prolonged over several years, causing commotion at home and abroad. By finding the location, strength and intention of the enemy, spies sped wars up and thus, Sun Tzu argument, made them more humane considering the enormous sums of money saved by having a short war, coupled with the personal risk facing spies which include death if captured. Tzu declared that the payment of large sums to spies was both merited and essential.<sup>28</sup>

Tzu states that there are five types of spy, and the trick is to use all five so that your opponent will never uncover the depths of your espionage network. They are:

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<sup>26</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>. Ibid.,p.59

<sup>28</sup>.Terry Crowley, *The Enemy Within: A History of Espionage* (Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2006) p.22.

- Local spies: Inhabitants of your opponent's country.
- Inward spies: Officials of your enemy, which could also include concubines or those in your enemy's ranks who feel frustrated at being in subordinate positions.
- Converted spies: These are the spies of your enemy that you have bribed into working for you. Therefore, they will carry back false information to your opponent.
- Doomed spies: Your own spies that you reveal false pieces of strategic information to so that when they are caught behind enemy lines, they will give your opponent false facts.
- Surviving spies: All spies who survive and bring back news from your enemy's camp.<sup>29</sup>

This is very relevant in today's fight against insurgency and banditry in the country. Investing in spies for the purpose of intelligence gathering will save the Nigerian military a lot of resources. It is obvious that the Nigerian military relies on military intelligence but still need to be done to have a more robust intelligence in the fight against insecurity.

### Conclusion

The paper has established that, Sun Tzu's work, *The Art of War* is one of the path breaking classical works that has continued to influence the art of warfare into the present times. Although it was written many centuries ago his ideas are germane to contemporary discourse on the art of warfare. We are living in a world that is consistently grappling with security challenges. Similarly, the development of sophisticated modern military weapons has made modern day warfare unwinnable as a result of the magnitude of destruction of lives and properties that may occur if a major war erupts. This we saw in the First and Second World Wars and some of the major crises rocking the world presently in Syria and some parts of Africa. Deploying Sun Tzu principles in the art of warfare as explained in the paper will reduce the likelihood of war as his ideas are centered on preventing war using other statecraft like diplomacy. War is only seen as a last resort when diplomatic means fail. And if war must be prosecuted caution must applied to minimize the level of casualties that may arise. This piece of work has remained relevant to strategic thinkers, military and political leaders and it has also continued to shape other aspect of life ranging from business to relationship among individuals and entities. A lot of lessons can be learnt from the work of Sun Tzu as advanced in the paper.

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